

5.3 Angry Outbursts

When requests don't get what you want from your spouse, demands don't produce results, and disrespect doesn't work either, your instinct has one more controlling and abusive strategy up its sleeve -- angry outbursts.

I view demands and disrespect as a ramping up to anger. Taken together, they define the typical fight of most couples. All three illustrate abuse in marriage, and what a tragedy it is. Instead of protecting each other, spouses become the greatest source of each other's unhappiness -- and it's all instinctive. What I mean by that is that if you don't do something to stop it from happening, you will most certainly become victim of each other's abusive instincts.

Although the primary reason for angry outbursts is trying to get what we want, our instinct makes us believe otherwise. It turns it into an issue of injustice. When we are angry we usually feel that someone is deliberately making us unhappy (by not giving us what we want), and what he or she is doing just isn't fair. In our angry state, we are convinced that reasoning won't work, and the offender will keep upsetting us until he or she is taught a lesson. The only thing such people understand is punishment, we assume. Then they'll think twice about making us unhappy again!

We think we are using anger to protect ourselves, and it offers a simple solution to our problem - - destroy the troublemaker. If our spouse turns out to be the troublemaker, we find ourselves hurting the one we've promised to cherish and protect. When we're angry we don't care about our spouse's feelings and we are willing to scorch the culprit if it prevents us from being hurt again.

But in the end, we have nothing to gain from anger. Punishment does not solve marital problems; it only makes your punished spouse want to inflict punishment on you, or if that doesn't work, leave you. When you become angry with your spouse, you threaten your spouse's safety and security -- you fail to provide protection. Your spouse rises to the challenge and tries to destroy you in retaliation. When anger wins, love loses.

Each of us has an arsenal of weapons we use when we're angry. If we think someone deserves to be punished, we unlock the gate and select an appropriate weapon.

Sometimes the weapons are verbal (ridicule and sarcasm), sometimes they're devious plots to cause suffering, and sometimes they're physical. But they all have one thing in common: they are designed to hurt people. Since our spouses are at such close range, we can use our weapons to hurt them the most.

Some of the husbands and wives I've counseled have fairly harmless arsenals, maybe just a few awkward efforts at ridicule. Others are armed to nuclear proportions; their spouses' very lives are in danger. The more dangerous your weapons are, the more important it is to control your temper. If you've ever lost your temper in a way that has caused your spouse great pain and suffering, you know you cannot afford to lose your temper again. You must go to extreme lengths to protect your spouse from yourself.

Instincts often help habits develop. An angry outburst is a good example of this. I've seen what looks like an angry outburst at the moment of a child's birth, and we can be assured that there wasn't much learning that caused that behavior. And as a child grows, the way anger is expressed becomes increasingly sophisticated. But it isn't the instinct that's becoming sophisticated -- it's the developing habit of an angry outburst, supported by the instinct, that makes it sophisticated. In marriage, one of our most destructive behaviors is an angry outburst, where we intentionally try to hurt our spouse and cause massive Love Bank withdrawals. But it's something we do naturally -- it's a habit that is developed by an instinct.

We can't change our instincts, but we can short-circuit their approach to a problem. If I have an instinct to have angry outbursts, it doesn't mean that I must go around losing my temper. I can create new habits that keep my anger in check. Habits that override inappropriate instincts are usually more difficult to create than habits that are not instinct driven, but it can be done. And in marriage, it must be done if you want to fall in love and stay in love.

Most effective anger management training programs focus attention on the creation of short-circuiting habits. Whenever a person begins to feel angry, he or she practices a behavior that has been shown to prevent an outburst. In the beginning, the new behavior is a conscious choice, something that is done regardless of how it feels to do it. Walking away from a frustrating situation is one example of a behavior that can short-circuit an angry outburst. Another is to follow a routine that relaxes your muscles and lowers adrenalin in your system. Eventually, with practice, the behavior that has proven effective in short-circuiting an angry outburst becomes a habit. Whenever the person begins to feel angry, the habit kicks in and angry outbursts are overcome.

My approach to anger management focuses attention on the same short-circuiting strategies that most other anger management programs stress. But I add something that most other plans neglect. I try to help my client overcome all abusive behavior, beginning with selfish demands, because that's where abuse usually begins. From there, I teach a client to stop making disrespectful judgments, and then he or she is finally in a better position to get angry outbursts under control. The underlying theme of this approach to anger management is to make my client aware of the fact that he or she has no right trying to control anyone else, regardless of what that person is doing. From there we go on to create habits that take the place of demands, disrespect and anger, so that my client can get what he or she needs from their spouse without being controlling.

Remember, in marriage you can be your spouse's greatest source of pleasure, but you can also be your spouse's greatest source of pain, particularly if you use the controlling and abusive strategies of demands, disrespect and anger to try to get what you need in marriage. If you use them, you are almost sure to lose your spouse's love for you.